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SUBJECT: FRENCH REACTION TO GERMAN ELECTION RESULTS; MOSTLY ABOUT US

Classified By: PolMC Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 (B & D).

1. (C) Summary: By and large, French politicians have interpreted the results of the German elections through purely partisan lenses -- and with an eye on the 2007 presidential elections in France. They find in this weekend's results across the Rhine primarily cautionary lessons against party splintering and an over-ambitious reform agenda that would call into question the French and German social models. Foreign Ministry and international affairs commentators are concerned more with the prospects for re-energizing the Franco-German couple as the "motor of Europe" to overcome current EU paralysis following French and Dutch rejection of the constitutional treaty. The French public seems largely to have shrugged off the way the French media has dramatized a "crisis of power" in Germany, given that the German parliamentary system is very different from the French presidential system. That said, Germany's current parliamentary gridlock, to the degree that it is seen as democratically reflecting a fragmented and divided public, torn between the need for reform and fears of its consequences, mirrors the quandary in which the French electors also find themselves. End summary.

Fear of reform

3. (C) French politicians and commentators have almost uniformly viewed the German elections through the prism of the politics of reform. Defense Minister Michelle Alliot-Marie's asserted in a TV interview that German voters had clearly rejected a fully "liberal" (that is, free-market) social model by not giving CDU leader Angela Merkel a clear mandate for change. As a Chirac loyalist and supporter of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin in his ambition to succeed Chirac, Alliot-Marie's point was that the French should prefer Villepin and his program of "social growth," aimed at adapting and preserving the French social model, to the more radical reforms advocated by Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy.

4. (C) Sarkozy himself has asserted the importance of France and Germany being "in phase" with each other, with his calls for reform echoing those of Merkel on the other side of the Rhine. There is a general sense here that Merkel clearly underestimated the fears that her calls for more radical economic reform would engender among a German electorate loath to lose its comforts and entitlements. This translates in France to a warning signal for Nicolas Sarkozy that his strategy of a dramatic break with the past, based on a more "Anglo-Saxon" and "liberal" economic vision, may not be in phase with a clear majority of the French electorate, either.

Fear of splintering

5. (C) The rise of the smaller parties in Germany has also given rise to reflections about the dangers of a split within the main parties, along the lines of those who voted for or against the EU constitutional treaty. Bernard Accoyer, head of the ruling Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), conceding that "the divided state of German society parallels that of French society," warned against divisions that could bring "disproportionate" influence to extremist factions. Many mainstream politicians in France fear that tensions within the center-right and center-left in France could potentially lead, given France's two-round presidential system and its tradition of large protest votes, to the unexpected victory (at least in the first round) of a marginal candidate from the far right or the far left (such as happened in the last elections, when Jean-Marie Le Pen shocked France by polling better than Socialist Party candidate Lionel Jospin).

6. (C) In the case of the UMP, the latter split boils down to the competition between PM de Villepin, increasingly regarded as President Chirac's heir in waiting, and Interior Minister Sarkozy with his calls for more of a break with the politics of the past. An independent candidacy by whichever one of them is not designated by the UMP could prove catastrophic for the center-right. Among the socialists, there exists the (lesser) risk of a split between the centrist party leadership led by Party Secretary Francois Hollande (and including heavyweights such as Dominique Strauss-Kahn and Jack Lang) and the anti-EU leftists whom

former PM Laurent Fabius is attempting to bring under his wing.

Fears of a paralyzed EU

17. (C) As would be expected, the Foreign Ministry has insisted that the GOF is prepared to work together with whatever German government is formed. Catherine Colonna, the Minister-Delegate responsible for European relations, has affirmed publicly that the elections will have no impact on bilateral relations. She has also stressed that, now as before, the Franco-German relationship can be expected to continue to act as the creative "motor" for the European Union. But it is difficult for many here to imagine how a weak German coalition government can contribute to overcoming the current crisis in the EU following demise of the European constitutional treaty. The failure of the German elections to produce either a clear mandate for liberal reforms or a clear mandate against them leads to the conclusion here that the Franco-German couple, and by extension the EU itself, will only muddle along at least until after the 2007 French presidential elections.

Fears of too much democracy

18. (C) Calls have been growing in France for some time, largely in reaction to President Chirac's quasi-monarchical dominance of all government institutions, to introduce more democracy through a system of proportional representation. The muddled results of the German elections, with their complicated proportional system and variable coalition geometries, will reinforce the view in France that it is better to err on the side of clarity and effective government (for a notoriously "ungovernable" people), even if this occurs at the expense of slightly less democracy. Former President Giscard d'Estaing's first take on the results was that they showed the wisdom of the French two-round and British first-past-the-post systems, which are designed to guarantee unambiguously a winner.

France is different

19. (C) Whatever the lessons to be found in the German elections, one cannot discount French exceptionalism. France does not automatically follow German or other European electoral trends. Indeed, as the President of the National Assembly's USA-France Friendship Group, Axel Poniatowski recently told the Ambassador, historically France and Germany have never been "in phase," to use Sarkozy's term. If one had a leftist government, the other tilted to the right, and vice versa. In sum, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which are structural, it thus seems unlikely that the muddled outcome of the German elections can or will be reproduced in France.

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